



Islamic Identity in Aceh Shaped by the Historical and Cultural Heritage of the Perlak Sultanate

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Abstract: Studies on the role of the Perlak Sultanate in the Islamization of Indonesia remain incomplete. This paper is intended to fill the knowledge gap concerning the role and contribution of the Peureulak Sultanate in the process. Moreover, the research is important in the context of the strengthening of Islamic identity in Aceh. Through analysis of historical evidence, the study considers and analyzes the role of the Peureulak Sultanate in influencing and shaping Islamic identity in the province. This should help preserve and strengthen the Acehese people's cultural identity, which is closely related to Islam. By reviewing the role of the sultanate in Islamization in Indonesia, the process can be viewed from a more holistic perspective. The study considers historical, social, cultural and identity aspects, allowing comprehensive and contextual understanding of the Islamization process. The research is of a historical nature. It was conducted by analyzing literature studies and document and archive studies; by in-depth interviews with local figures in Perlak; by conducting field studies at Perlak Sultanate heritage sites (graves of the Perlak kings, the ancient harbor, the Perlak River); and by conducting historical analysis. The findings reveal that the Perlak Sultanate has a rich historical heritage, especially in the form of the tombs of the Perlak kings, which played an important role in strengthening Islamic identity in Aceh. The sultanate also played a role in the pepper trade, which, through the trade routes followed, helped spread Islam. The trade not only created economic wealth but also brought positive changes to culture and society, with values such as brotherhood, tolerance, and respect becoming a strong foundation. The research results also provide in-depth insights into the historical role of the Perlak Sultanate in the formation of Islamic identity in Aceh, and the importance of factors such as trade in this process. The study makes a valuable contribution to understanding of Aceh's diverse history and culture.

Keywords: historical heritage, perlak sultanate, strengthening of islamic identity, local history

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A. Introduction

Aceh is a province rich in historical and cultural heritage. As a region with a long history, it has many historical sites that are evidence of past civilizations. One such historical site relates to the Peureula/Perlak Sultanate in East Aceh Regency. This has always been a reference for the first entry of Islam into Indonesia (Joelismansyah, 2021). It was founded in 840 AD, with its first king being Sultan Alaidin Syed Maulana Abdul Aziz Syah. The sultanate until it was merged into part of the Samudra Pasai Kingdom in 1296 AD, under the leadership of Sultan Malikus Saleh (Aizid, 2016).

At the beginning of the 8th century, the Peureulak Kingdom developed highly advanced trading ports (Wahyudi & Suaedy, 2022).. This created a global trade network through trade (including that of spices), countries in the Indian Ocean became interconnected (Sudarman, Rahmi, Wusqo, Halimy, & Rahmawati, 2021), which led to widespread mixed marriages between Muslim traders and local residents. Peureulak had cosmopolitan characteristics and a diverse society. The effect of this was the rapid development of Islam, which experienced its peak of glory during the time of the female Prime Minister Putri Nurul A'la in 1108-1134 M (Henarwanto, 2022; Nasution & Miswari, 2017).

To date, research on the Peureulak Sultanate has tended to discuss the conflict in the Peureulak Sultanate between Ahlus-sunnah Waljama'ah and Shi'ah, which had an impact on the split of the sultanate into Peureulak Tunong and Peureulak Baroh in 966-973 M (Bustamam-Ahmad, 2017; Muchsin, 2019; Nasution & Miswari, 2017; Zukhdi, 2017). Other research has discussed Peureulak as a region rich in natural resources and as a port that exports natural resource commodities. It is famous for producing *Kayei Peureulak* (peureulak wood), a type of wood that is ideal for shipbuilding. In the agricultural sector, the region produces pepper, rattan, and other forest products for commercialization (Sulistiono & Muchsin, 2022). Pepper commodities are exported via Peureulak (Setyawati, 2016).

However, studies of the Peureulak Sultanate have never been conducted from a historical or cultural perspective. Such an approach would provide more comprehensive understanding of the history of Islamization in Aceh from social, cultural and political perspectives, which would help understand the historical social and cultural context that influenced the development of Islam in Aceh.

This research aims to review the role of the Peureulak Sultanate in the historical social, political and cultural contexts and to analyze their implications for the strengthening of Islamic identity in Aceh. The review will be conducted by

explaining the contribution of the sultanate to the development of Islam in Aceh, and by providing more comprehensive understanding of the local history and culture which is important for the Peureulak community.

Studies of the role of the Peureulak Sultanate in Islamization in Indonesia remain very limited. By conducting this research, it is therefore hoped to fill the knowledge gap regarding the role and contribution of the sultanate in the Islamization process. Moreover, the research is important in the context of the strengthening of Islamic identity in Aceh. Analysis of historical evidence will help explain how the role of the Peureulak Sultanate influenced and shaped Islamic identity in Aceh. This can help preserve and strengthen the Acehnese people's cultural identity, which is closely related to Islam.

This research focus on: 1) What was the role of the Perlak Sultanate in the Islamization process in Indonesia?; 2) What historical evidence supports the role of the Perlak Sultanate in Islamization in Indonesia?; and 3) What are the implications of the role of the Perlak Sultanate in strengthening Islamic identity in Aceh?

B. Methods

The research adopts a historical study approach that involves a series of methodological steps to understand and analyze the role of the Perlak Sultanate in strengthening Islamic identity in Aceh. The methodological stages followed are detailed below.

The research began by conducting a literature review. This involved searching for relevant literature related to the history of the Perlak Sultanate, the process of Islamization in Aceh, and the role of the pepper trade in the region's history. The review aimed to understand the historical context and build a solid theoretical framework for the research.

The next stage was analysis of relevant historical archives and museums. The researchers visited these historical sources to collect documents such as letters, notes, artifacts and other valuable information related to the Perlak Sultanate. This helped uncover information that may not be available in the general literature.

The following step was to interview local figures in the former Perlak Sultanate area. These were conducted to gather views, knowledge and additional information not identified in the literature review or archival documents. The opinions and experiences of local figures can provide valuable insights into understanding the history and identity of Islam in the region.

This research also included field studies involving direct visits to the Perlak Sultanate area. During these trips, the researchers visited historical sites, tombs and ancient harbors related to the history of the sultanate. Data such as photos and video recordings were gathered to document the historical heritage.

The final stage of the research was the data analysis. The researchers analyzed all the information obtained from various sources, including relevant literature, archival documents, interviews, and field studies. The analysis was conducted using a historical approach in order to understand and decipher how Islamic identity in Aceh was strengthened through the historical legacy of the Perlak Sultanate. The results of this analysis helped to formulate conclusions and clarify the research findings.

C. Results and Discussion

Early History of the Perlak Sultanate

Before the rise of the Islamic Empire of Aceh (Aceh Darussalam) as a powerful Islamic empire, there were several earlier Islamic kingdoms in Aceh, such as Perlak, Samudra Pasai, Pidie and Daya. Samudra Pasai, long before the rise of Aceh, had reached a significant level of development in both economic and religious life. As described by Reid, the region contained one of the largest international ports (Reid, 2014). This experienced rapid development in the fourteenth century as a trading center where traders from China, India and Arabia started their trading activities (Auni, 1996).

Aceh has a long, rich and complex history; the earliest sources available demonstrate its position as a site of cultural and trade contact with a variety of other peoples with origins stretching from China to the Coromandel Coast of India. Maritime sites in this region, such as Lamri, were mentioned in Arabic geographical texts from the ninth century. Archaeological finds reflect its position as a node in trans-regional trade networks, with many finds of South Indian red ceramics, alongside highly colored ceramics from China, including Yuan blue and white porcelain, in layers that show a clear mix of wares this trade, not just stratigraphic layers. Various types of relics were found from different regions. Due to these diverse heritages, it is strongly believed that this area was one of the trade nodes for various regions on the coast of the Malacca Strait. The Samudra-Pasai kingdom, believed to be the first in Southeast Asia to convert to Islam, is now understood to have had a ruler of Turkic blood. The 1297 royal tomb discovered in Pasai is said to belong to Sultan Malik al Saleh (r. 1285-1297). The other two main Islamic kingdoms

in northern Sumatra were Perlak and Aceh Darussalam. When Ibn Battuta set foot in Sumatra in 1345, Aceh was under the rule of Sultan Malik Al-Zahir, who began the tradition of issuing gold kupang coins decorated with Arabic writing (Gunn, 2011).

During the thirteenth century, the various settlements along the coast of northern Sumatra appear to have been largely independent under the rule of various coastal 'kings'. During this period, several ports, including Perlak, were established under Muslim rule. The earliest Islamic sultanate in the region with significant resources was the Sultanate of Pasai (on the north coast of Aceh) in the late thirteenth century. This region is particularly rich in early stone monuments in the form of grave markers, which have attracted considerable scholarly attention. Elizabeth Lambourn, for example, produced innovative work on the importing of Muslim funerary monument models from South Asia and of the development of local Muslim grave marker traditions in the region (Hillenbrand, 2024). More recently, Claude Guillot and Ludvik Kalus produced a comprehensive catalog of inscriptions from major burial sites on the north coast of Aceh, dating from around 1400 to 1523 (Guillot & Kalus, 2006). The catalog includes the identification of Qur'anic verses, Hadith, poetry, and other texts in their inscriptions, as well as the proposal of a new typology of forms which refers to suggestions for a new classification of the types of inscriptions found in large graves on the north coast of Aceh, such as the style of writing, the type of text contained in them, and the architectural form of the carvings. In addition, almost half of the book comprises essays that develop new interpretations of these data, in which they reconstruct the genealogy of the Pasai rulers in a way that challenges the established versions derived from later Malay literary texts, including the *Hikayat Raja Pasai* and *Malay History* (Hill, 1960). Important contributions of Guillot and Kalus' work to understanding of the early history of the region include its emphasis on the significance of Abbasi descendants in later times (820 M) in the competition for religious and political legitimacy during the early period of Pasai history, as well as the apparent importance of women in positions of authority. These are important precursors in the subsequent development of the Aceh sultanate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Daly, Feener, & Reid, 2012; Feener, Daly, & Reid, 2011).

The penetration of Islam reached a significant stage when the rulers of Sumatra began to accept the new religion. In 1292, during his visit to Sumatra, Marco Polo saw that the Ferlec kingdom had converted to Islam. Ferlec is identified with Perlak (Acehnese: Peureula'), the same as Perla, a town around thirty-two miles south of Diamond Point. Apart from Ferlec, Marco Polo also mentioned five other kingdoms in northern Sumatra, including Basma (Pasai), Samara (Samudra) and Lambrli

(Lamri). According to him, all of these were kingdoms that worshipped idols. A tombstone found in Pasai shows that Malik-ul-Saleh, the first Muslim king of Samudera-Pasai, died in 1297, having married the daughter of the king of Perlak. Evidence shows that Islam spread from Perlak to Samudera-Pasai between 1292 and 1297 (Dasgupta, 1962).

Perlak's Relations with the Surrounding Area

The Perlak Sultanate had strong relations with the surrounding region, including the Pasai Sultanate. Archaeological remains in Pasai show that the first king, mentioned in traditions such as those found in the Hikayat Raja-raja Pasai, named Merah Silu or Sultan Malikus Saleh, married the daughter of Perlak and had two sons, Malik Al-Zahir and Malik Al-Mansur (Ismail, 1993).

Historically, Pasai was one of the most important ports in the Southeast Asian region; the prosperous sultanate was a place where traders from many countries conducted their trade. According to Horace Stone, the port of Pasai developed into a large trading center; in around 1400, trade was divided between Majapahit in Java and Pasai in Sumatra (Stone, 1966). Describing Pasai in the early sixteenth century, Pires demonstrates that because Melaka had fallen to the Portuguese, and Pidie was at war, the port became increasingly prosperous, as traders from various regions such as Arabia, Turkey, Iran, Gujarat, the Malay Peninsula, Java, and Siam visited it. Pasai's natural resources included pepper, silk and benzoa (Pires, 2014). Pires also explains that Pasai produced eight to ten thousand *bahar* of peppers yearly (*Bahar* is a variable unit of weight, equivalent to 3 pikul or approx. 180 kg). Oil was also another important resource, which was imported from Perlak. Silk from Pasai was also an important commodity, attracting European interest, especially from Alfonso de Albuquerque, the Portuguese governor of Goa, who eventually conquered Melaka (Hadi, 2004).

Perlak's relationship with the classical kingdom of Java is described in the book *Nagarakertagama* (1365), which mentions Perlak, Samudra and Larauri (Lamri) as states in Sumatra that recognized the highest authority of the Majapahit emperor Hayam Wuruk. Whether the Majapahit empire ever encompassed all of Sumatra is debatable. Chinese records show that in 1377 the Javanese conquered parts of the Srivijaya kingdom (Dasgupta, 1962).

Furthermore, in the Hikayat Raja Raja Pasai or Pasai Chronicle, it is stated that in around 1350 the Majapahit troops attempted to conquer Pasai, but failed. This Javanese action was more of a punitive expedition than a direct conquest of Pasai.

Shortly after, in 1383, Su-wen-ta-na (Samudra?) sent an envoy named Ambar to the Chinese court. When Cheng Ho visited Lam-bui (Lamri) in 1408, it was clear that he was dealing with an independent kingdom, as almost no trace of Javanese authority could be found there. In the early fourteenth century, a traveler from Persia, Rashiduddin (1310), noted that traders from various countries visited Lamori Island (Lamri) (Ajis, 2018; Ibrahim, Abdullah, Hasyim, Husni, & Saidin, 2022).

After returning from China to Venice in around 1292 AD, Marco Polo stopped on the coast of the Malacca Strait and observed that in Ferlec (Perlak) there were already Saracen traders who regularly arrived with their ships and introduced Islamic law to the residents of Perlak (Zuhdi, 1997). Even though Perlak has been said to have been an Islamic kingdom since the 9th century AD, evidence still needs to be established as to whether it was this was the case before Marco Polo arrived there, or whether it had developed long beforehand. What is clear, is that in around 1292 AD Marco Polo observed that there were Saracen ships, indicating that for at least several years before that, Perlak had been visited by Muslim traders (Zuhdi, 1997). Records from the beginning of the Mongol Dynasty in China show several kingdoms in Sumatra, such as Samudera, Lamuri, Perlak, Tamiang and Haru. The Mongols forced Tamiang and Haru to send tributes such as pepper, gold and cinnamon. The Samudera Kingdom began to have relations with the Mongol Dynasty in 1282 (Ismail, 1993).

Heritage of the Perlak Sultanate

Several types of historical relics from the Perlak Sultanate still exist today. First, there are a number of ancient tombs which are part of its historical heritage. These include the Sultan's Tomb, Tengku Tapa's Tomb, Nurul A'la's Tomb, and Banta Ahmad's Tomb. Even though they are geographically close together, they are spread across several villages on both sides of the Perlak River.

In general, the tombstones found in the tombs of the Perlak Sultanate are made of black river stone and do not include any writing. This fact makes archaeological analysis and studies very difficult to conduct. The only exception is the tomb of Princess Nurul A'la, which has remarkable carvings.

Moreover, other ancient tomb complexes have not been adequately identified. One adjacent to the Banta Ahmad tomb shows similarities to the shape of the tombstones and motifs of the Pasai Sultanate. This indicates that the Perlak Sultanate has historical connections with the surrounding regions; further research would provide deeper insights into the history and culture of the Perlak Sultanate.

Figure 1

Tombstone of the Grave of Princess Nurul a'la



Tombstone of the grave of Princess Nurul a'la of the Perlak Sultanate
(Source: Researchers' personal collection)

Figure 2

Grave Tombstone of the Banta Ahmad Tomb Complex



(Source: Researcher's personal collection)

The Perlak Sultanate, part of Aceh's history, also left historical traces in the form of silver coins known as "keuh coins". These are silent past witnesses indicating the currency and economic system of the sultanate. They symbolize its trading glory and

wealth, reflecting its ties to regional trade and cultural influence within the region. The keuh coins form an important part of our understanding of the history and culture of the Perlak Sultanate, and provide valuable insights into the past.

Figure 3

Ahmad Keuh coins, currency from the Perlak sultanate



(Source: Langsa City Museum Collection collection)

In addition, the Perlak Sultanate has a strong legacy related to traces of pepper trading activities, with Perlak being famous as an ancient pepper trading center. Life in the ancient Perlak Kingdom depended on rivers as the main source of community life, such as trading, farming and fishing. The Peureulak River is the center of life for the kingdom and its residents. Because of the busy trade along the river, the Perlak Sultanate built the main settlement center, together with the port city of Peureulak, a location for pepper trading activities and exploration routes to upstream areas (Ajis, 2021).

Traces of the history of the pepper trade in Perlah include Perlak kuala (port). Kuala Perlak is one of the historical trading ports recorded in the records of Marco Polo and Ibnu Battutah. The former, who stopped in Perlak in 1292 on his return to Venice, described its early inhabitants as predominantly pagan, but many of those living in the port city had converted to Islam, influenced by the Saracen traders who frequently visited there. Marco Polo noted that traders had introduced Islam to the Perlak population at that time.

Kuala Perlak was also the residence of many Muslim traders from various countries, such as Parris, Arabs and Indians. In 1292, it was the main port used for pepper exports on the East coast of Aceh (Affan & Suaedy, 2022; McKinnon, 2015). It is important to note that the port had existed long before pepper became a major export commodity in the 18th century. The existence of Kuala Perlak as a center for

pepper trading activities and interaction with many Muslim traders from various countries shows a relationship between the era of trade and the Islamist process in Aceh. This process was performed by traders, not through ulama, whose existence in the Islamization process came after the Muslim traders.

In the Peurlak area, the ancient ports were the center of pepper trading activities; they were known as "kuala." There are several kuala along the east coast of Perlak, including Kuala Seumilang, Kuala Perlak, Kuala Beukah, Kuala Buga, Kuala Leuge, Kuala Jengki, and Kuala Bayeun. Kuala Perlak was the largest port and the center of other ports. Currently, Kuala Perlak is geographically located in the Peureulak area, but its function as an important trading port no longer exists. Changes in trade activities, infrastructure development, and other factors over time have caused changes in port functions. Currently, Kuala Perlak is mostly used by the local community to irrigate rice fields. The location of the Lada port on the east coast has strategic advantages because of its position on the Malacca Strait, which is the main trade route for pepper and other spices exported to the Middle East and countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea (Reid, 2011a, 2011b).

Political changes during colonial times meant the pepper trade center was moved to a more open location, because it was located off the East coast and had a wide area and good depth, making it easier for large ships to dock. Since 1873, the trade has been focused on Idi port, Idi Rayeu, East Aceh. After the Dutch colonial government in 1892 introduced special shipping regulations for Aceh (as documented in Staatsbl. 1892 no. 203 and 1893 no. 83), only the ports specifically mentioned in these regulations were open for general trade; short-distance sea shipping could only use other ports (Paulus, 1917).

Figure 3

Estuary of the Idi River, East Coast of Aceh



Estuary of the Idi River, East Coast of Aceh in 1892
(Source: www.collectie.wereldculture.nl)

The pepper planting center in Perlak is in the Simpang Anas and Alur Nireh areas. Pepper cultivation has developed rapidly, and export yields far exceed other natural commodities. In 1887-1900, volumes were around 1,300 kojang or 26,000 picols (picols = pikul (count) and kojang = unit weight). Gradually, pepper trading activities earned large profits from exports. Apart from the abundant pepper yield, this is also because the north coast of Aceh produces very little pepper. Planters on the east coast can negotiate directly with buyers, which was something pepper farmers on the west coast could not do, as their leaders strictly control and monopolized the pepper trade. In addition, planters on the east coast also received advances for cultivation from lenders (mostly Chinese) in Penang.

In 1900, most of Perlak's residents come from Peusangan, Bireun. Then, in the pepper plantations in the Alur Niri area, many Samalanga people were also found. On the other hand, Simpang Anas is mostly inhabited by the Gedong (Geudong) community. Geographically, there are many small rivers in Perlak. The Bajan River forms the southern boundary between Langsar (Langsa) and Perlak; in the interior, the landscape is bordered to the west by the Gajoe plain, where the Perlak River flows, to the north by the Idi landscape Pedawa Rajeu landscape (Paulus, 1917).

Pepper trading activities had also created new patterns of interaction in society, which not only reflected efficiency in the pepper trade, but also have a positive impact on social and cultural values. One of the main values that emerged from this activity was brotherhood. Communities involved in the pepper trade often formed close fraternal relationships with each other. They worked together, share resources, and supported each other, creating strong mutual social bonds. Pepper trading activities in the Perlak Sultanate have encouraged inter-ethnic tolerance. Because the trade involved many different ethnic groups, people learned to coexist and respect each other's differences. This helped reduce conflict and promote harmonious inter-ethnic coexistence (Ahmad, Wafi, Mushkalamzai, & Hadi, 2023; Rahman, 2020; Rahman, Arsal, & Shintasiwi, 2022; Rahman, Riyani, Sahudra, & Akob, 2023).

D. Conclusion

The study has discussed the strengthening of Islamic identity in Aceh through the historical heritage of the Perlak Sultanate. The sultanate holds a significant position in the Islamization process in Aceh, being one of the early ones to play an important role in the introduction of Islam in the region. The research has revealed that the Perlak Sultanate left behind various historical legacies that play a crucial role

in strengthening Islamic identity in Aceh. In particular, the tombs of the Perlak kings played a central role in this process. Apart from the Aceh, Pasai and Lamuri Sultanates, the Perlak Sultanate also made an important contribution to the early Islamization of Aceh, especially through the East Coast route.

The importance of trade routes cannot be ignored in the Islamization process of the Perlak Sultanate. With one being related to the pepper trade, they became the main force that helped spread Islam. Historical remains related to these routes, such as keuh money and ancient ports, reflect the important role of economics in the spread of Islam in the region. The pepper trade brought economic wealth and positive changes in the culture and society of the Perlak Sultanate. Values such as brotherhood, tolerance, and respect were the strong foundations that formed the cross-ethnic communities involved in the pepper trade. This shows that the trade had a more profound impact than simply an economic one, and that Islamic civilization in Perlak grew and developed through factors such as this.

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